



Elite Influence on General Political Preferences

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Expressive voting
Political preferences
Voting models
Political elite
Elections

ABSTRACT

Economic models of democratic decision-making tend to assume that voters have preferences and politicians adjust their platforms to conform to voter preferences. However, the direction of causation (mostly) goes the other way. Political elites offer policy platforms and voters adopt the policy preferences of their political anchors. Because the choices of individual voters do not affect aggregate political outcomes, voters tend to vote expressively, and might vote for outcomes they would not choose if the choice were theirs alone. The concept of expressive preferences is well-established. This paper takes the next step by explaining how voters form their expressive preferences. Expressive preferences tend to be anchored in a political identity associated with a candidate, party, or ideology, and people's political preferences on most issues are derived from their anchor preferences, which are defined by political elites.

Introduction

Economic models of democratic decision-making depict individual voters as having preferences, and depict candidates and parties as adjusting their platforms to correspond with the preferences of voters. One prominent example is the median voter model described by [Downs \(1957\)](#), who depicts candidates and parties adjusting their platforms to correspond with the preferences of voters. Economic analysis in general takes preferences as given and analyzes individual behavior, given those preferences. This paper builds on an extensive previous literature to explain why the political preferences of citizens and voters are defined by parties and candidates, and why parties and candidates have the ability to change people's public policy preferences. Rather than parties and candidates designing their platforms to correspond with voter preferences, voters adopt the political preferences that are offered to them by parties and candidates.

One reason voter preferences are subject to manipulation by the political elite is that the choices voters make do not affect political outcomes. Voters know that election outcomes will be the same regardless of how they cast their individual vote. The utility they get from having political preferences comes solely from having and expressing them. The big difference between political choices and market choices is that when consumers make choices in the market, they get what they choose, while when voting, what they get is unrelated to what they choose. The paper discusses factors that affect the political preferences held and expressed by the masses, to conclude that people adopt the political preferences pushed on them by the political elite.

The paper relies on findings from a large number of previous studies to support the conclusion that the masses derive their political prefer-

ences from those offered to them by the political elite. The evidence is not new, but the conclusion differs from that of standard economic models of democratic decision-making. Rather than candidates and parties adjusting their platforms to conform with the preferences of the voters, voters adjust their political preferences to conform with the platforms offered to them by the political elite. The idea that the expressive preferences of voters can differ from their instrumental preferences has been considered for decades. This paper takes the next step by discussing how citizens and voters form their expressive preferences.

Instrumental and Expressive Preferences

In markets, when people make choices, they get what they choose, which gives them an incentive to choose the alternative that gives them the outcome producing the most utility. In politics, the choices people make do not determine what they get. In elections; one vote will have no effect on the outcome, which breaks the link between choices and outcomes. Because their political choices have no effect on political outcomes, people may express political preferences for outcomes they would not choose if the choice were theirs alone.

[Pareto \(1963\)](#) makes the distinction between what he calls logical versus non-logical action. Logical actions directly determine an outcome. A diner chooses a salad over a pizza, and the diner gets the salad. Non-logical actions do not have a connection between the action and the outcome, so for example, when a voter's action is to vote for candidate A over B, the election outcome is unaffected by the voter's choice. For those outside the policy-making elite, political decisions fall into Pareto's category of non-logical action. The action of voting does not affect the election outcome, because elections are (almost) never deter-

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jge.2021.100021>

Received 30 September 2021; Received in revised form 3 November 2021; Accepted 14 November 2021

Available online 16 November 2021

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mined by one vote.. Because political outcomes are invariant to any one individual's expressed preferences, the utility people get from having and expressing political preferences comes solely from the satisfaction they get from having and expressing them.

[Hamlin and Jennings \(2011\)](#) refer to non-logical action as expressive behavior and logical action as instrumental behavior. With logical action, to use Pareto's terminology, people act instrumentally; with non-local action they act expressively. An important corollary to this distinction is that people's expressive preferences may differ from their instrumental preferences. In logical or instrumental actions they choose the outcome they most prefer, whereas in non-logical or expressive situations they may express preferences for outcomes different from what they would choose if the choice were instrumental.

[Tullock \(1971\)](#) offers an example, observing that individuals may vote for candidates and policies that promote government redistribution to the poor, even if those voters are uncharitable and would not give money to the poor themselves. Voting to help the less fortunate may make them feel good about expressing a charitable view and imposes no instrumental cost on them. Donating money to charitable organizations means individuals have less money to spend on other things, whereas voting for charitable policies costs them nothing. [Gino et al. \(2016: 191\)](#) observe that people "...gather and process information ... in a way that is predictably biased toward helping them to feel that their behavior is moral, honest, or fair, while still pursuing their self-interest." This is especially easy with expressive actions that result in no instrumental consequences.

A vote for one alternative over another does not imply that the voter would prefer that alternative to win. A vote for Jones does not express a preference for Jones to win the election, because a voter is not choosing whether Jones will be elected. As [Brennan and Lomasky \(1993: ch. 2\)](#) observe,: if a voter would be \$500 better off if A were chosen rather than B, but gets \$.02 more expressive value for voting for B, the voter will choose to vote for B. The nature of voting can create a prisoners' dilemma situation in which voters collectively could choose outcomes that make them all worse off—and that no individual would choose if the choice were theirs alone.

[McMurray \(2015\)](#) observes that instrumental voters have no incentive to actually vote, no matter how well informed they are. The first step in understanding how political preferences affect public policy is to understand how people adopt the political preferences they express. Political preferences are expressive, not instrumental, so unlike in markets, people do not necessarily express political preferences for candidates or policies that make them better off, and do not necessarily express political preferences for outcomes they would choose if the choices were theirs alone.

Public Choice Theory

Public choice theory was developed in response to a mid-twentieth century methodology that depicted public policy as designed by an omniscient benevolent government to maximize social welfare.¹ [Buchanan \(1975\)](#) notes that just as markets may fail to reach some ideal benchmark for welfare maximization, the same is true of governments, so public choice theory uses the same tools of analysis to evaluate government action that economists use to evaluate resource allocation in the private sector. Economic analysis typically starts with the assumption that individuals have a given set of preferences and examines how they can best satisfy those preferences given the opportunity set they face, as [Stigler and Becker \(1977\)](#) describe, but that assumption is tenuous when choices are purely expressive.

One might even question the assumption that people have preferences and base their choices on those preferences. [Buchanan \(1999: 245,](#)

¹ See, for examples, [Bator \(1957\)](#) and [Graaf \(1957\)](#). [Bator \(1958\)](#) describes conditions for social welfare maximization. [Kohn \(2004\)](#) offers an insightful critique of this line of analysis.

italics in original) notes, "Individuals do not act so as to maximize utilities described in *independently-existing functions*. They confront genuine choices and the sequence of decisions taken may be conceptualized, *ex post* (after the choices) in terms of 'as if' functions that are maximized. But these 'as if' functions are, themselves, generated in the choosing process, not separately from such process. ... The potential participants do not know until after they enter the process what their own choices will be." The issue in analyzing expressive political preferences is to understand what motivates people to make their expressive choices.

[Downs \(1957\)](#) assumes that voter preferences are given and depicts candidate platforms as adjusting to conform to the preferences of the median voter. When preferences are aggregated by majority rule voting, the collective preference is the preference of the median voter.² But [Brennan and Lomasky \(1993\)](#) argue that voters vote expressively and have no incentive to vote for outcomes they would most prefer. The model does not depict an outcome that the median voter would choose if the choice were up to that voter, but the aggregation of expressive preferences that may differ substantially from voters' instrumental preferences.³

Using some basic notation to illustrate the issue, given individual preferences for n voters $P_1, P_2, P_3, \dots, P_n$, voting models show how individual preferences are aggregated by some function f to produce a collective choice C ,

$$C = f(P_1, P_2, P_3, \dots, P_n). \quad (1)$$

The concept behind expressive voting is that voters may express preferences when voting that are different from the voters' preferred outcomes. Representing the instrumental preferences of voter i as D_i and expressive preferences of that voter as E_i , if voters vote instrumentally, then in (1) $P_i = D_i$ whereas if they vote expressively, $P_i = E_i$. The issue in interpreting collective choices as being determined by citizen preferences is that $D_i \neq E_i$.

Assuming instrumental voting, voter i expresses preferences D_i for the outcome the voter would most prefer, so,

$$CI = f(D_1, D_2, D_3, \dots, D_n) \quad (2)$$

However, if voters vote expressively rather than instrumentally, the outcome is determined by voters' expressive preferences E_i , so

$$CE = f(E_1, E_2, E_3, \dots, E_n), \quad (3)$$

and

$$CI \neq CE \quad (4)$$

The issue with formal voting models is not the logic by which they depict the aggregation of votes, but rather with their implied assumption that they depict the outcome as the aggregation of instrumental preferences when votes are cast expressively. Voting models analyze the function, f , that aggregates voter preferences, taking those preferences as given and implicitly instrumental. The outcome is analyzed as if it shows the relationship between voters' preferences for outcomes and the actual collective choice, but

$$CI \neq f(E_1, E_2, E_3, \dots, E_n). \quad (5)$$

For example, [Downs \(1957\)](#) depicts the aggregation of preferences by majority rule voting as the preference of the median voter, but the collective choice is determined by the expressive preferences of the voters,

² [Enelow and Hinich \(1984\)](#) provide an overview of this type of model, although as [Tideman \(2006\)](#) notes, the way that votes are aggregated can affect the collective choice outcome.

³ [MacMurray \(2017: 120\)](#) develops a model in which if a voter's "vote does not turn out to be pivotal, then his vote choice does not influence his utility." This assumes instrumental voting, and as noted, the utility-maximizing instrumental voter will abstain. The voter's utility from voting comes from expressing a preference, not the (negligible) effect the voter's vote has on the election outcome.

not the voters' instrumental preferences. Because expressive preferences are different from instrumental preferences, the outcome is not the one the median voter most prefers.⁴

Voting models are not wrong in the way they describe preference aggregation. They are simply describing the mechanism, f by which individual preferences are aggregated. But it would be an error to use the models to describe a link between voters' instrumental preferences and collectively chosen outcomes. Discussing strategic voting, [Dasgupta and Maskin \(2020: 462\)](#) say "if citizens do vote strategically, then the voting rule in question does not produce the outcomes intended: since the rule's inputs are distorted, so are the outputs." The same conclusion applies to expressive voting. Election outcomes are interpreted as if they are CI , but because the inputs are expressive, the outcomes are CE .

Voting models provide a link between expressive preferences and collective choices, not instrumental preferences and collective choices.⁵ The models are not wrong, but the way they are interpreted usually is. They are interpreted with the implied assumption that $C = CI$ when in fact $C = CE$. The vote aggregation procedures are modeled with mathematical precision, but the interpretations given to the results are precisely wrong.⁶

Preference Formation With Instrumental Choices

Because the key conclusion in this paper that citizens derive their political preferences from those of the political elite is at odds with the economic methodology advocated by [Stigler and Becker \(1977\)](#) that preferences should be taken as given, it is worth noting that this assumption has been questioned with regard to instrumental choices. Behavioral economics ([Kahneman et al. 1991](#)) finds that the way choices are framed can affect the choices people make, and particularly relevant to expressive choice, the endowment effect appears to attribute more utility to things people own, just because they own them. People get utility from the political preferences they have simply because they are their preferences. If the endowment effect holds for instrumental choices, it should be even more powerful with expressive choices. As Caplan (2008) observes, people bear no cost from supporting political viewpoints that would make them instrumentally worse off.

The effect of advertising on people's instrumental choices has been noted by [Veblen \(1899\)](#), [Packard \(1957\)](#), [Galbraith \(1952\)](#), and [Frank \(2000\)](#). It is not unreasonable to believe that advertising is even more effective in forming political preferences, which tend to be based more on emotion than on reason.⁷ Wittman (1989, 1995) discusses how political advertising, party platforms, and special interest groups influence voter preferences. Voters, who have little incentive to collect information themselves, often follow the recommendations of interest groups with whom they identify.

The argument that people's expressive political preferences are derived from the political elite gains some standing from the recognition that even people's instrumental choices are affected by outside influences. If this is true when the choices people make affect the outcomes

⁴ It may be worth a mention that the individual with the median instrumental preference is not necessarily the individual with the median expressive preference.

⁵ Arrow (1963) depicts the challenge in making social choices as finding a method of aggregating preferences to arrive at a collective choice that maximizes welfare, but attempts along this line are based on the assumption that the preferences voters reveal at the ballot box are instrumental preferences, when in fact they are expressive preferences.

⁶ Brennan and Hamlin (1998) analyze a model in which some voters vote expressively while others vote instrumentally. The model shows why the outcome will differ from pure instrumental voting, as indicated in this section, but it does not explore how people form expressive preferences, which is an essential next step in understanding how expressive voting affects public policy outcomes.

⁷ See [Hayek \(1961\)](#) for an argument in the other direction, with particular reference to [Galbraith \(1952\)](#).

they experience, it is even more plausible that it is true when the choices they make have no effect on the outcomes they experience.

The Formation of Political Preferences

How do people form their political preferences? One factor is group solidarity. People want to fit in with their friends and their peer groups, so will be inclined to adopt the political preferences of their peer groups, as [Chen and Urminsky \(2019\)](#) find. They feel good to do so, and it costs them nothing in terms of actual political outcomes. [Van Bavel and Pereira \(2018\)](#) offer an identity-based model of political belief in which people adopt political views of others in their group as a part of their group identity. Because the adoption and acting upon political views falls into Pareto's category of non-logical action, this is easy to do, costs people nothing in an instrumental sense, and brings them utility by reinforcing their group identity. [Cohen \(2003\)](#) concludes that people adopt the political views of their group and are completely unaware that they are doing so.

Peer pressure may also affect whether individuals are sufficiently motivated to vote at all, as [Levine and Mattozzi \(2020\)](#) argue. [Akerlof and Kranton \(2000\)](#) discuss how group identity influences individual views and behavior. If one's peer group supports a particular candidate, the concern about disapproval of one's peers might affect not only who individuals in the group support, but also can lead people to vote rather than abstain. People desire "belief consonance" with their associates, which leads them to both try to convince their associates of their own beliefs and to modify their own beliefs to conform with those with whom they associate. [Golman et al. \(2016: 172\)](#) say, "When people are disturbed by others' discrepant beliefs, one option is to change their own beliefs to conform. This outcome should be especially likely when an individual regularly confronts multiple people who share common beliefs discrepant with his or her own beliefs (for example, they are in the same social group)." People tend to adopt the political views of those with whom they associate because it gives them a feeling of belonging, and does not impose on them any instrumental costs.

People like to side with winners, so there may be a bandwagon effect in politics, following [Veblen \(1899\)](#). Candidates and policies that appear popular may gain additional support simply because of that appearance. The same may be true in markets. People may choose to eat at particular restaurant because it is popular, but a negative experience at a restaurant is likely to make them choose differently next time. Expressive choices do not bring with them any negative consequences, so the bandwagon effect may be a larger determinant of political preferences than for preferences for goods and services.

[Mullainathan and Washington \(2009: 108\)](#) find that "the results of two estimation strategies together provide evidence that the act of voting strengthens future opinions of the chosen candidate." The endowment effect suggests that when people choose a candidate, that increases their support for "their" candidate. Having voted for a candidate, people reduce cognitive dissonance by thinking more highly of that candidate in the future. There is no instrumental cost to doing so, because an individual vote has no effect on the outcome. Meanwhile, for those who support losing candidates, [Eubanks et al. \(2020\)](#) find that voters modify their views after an election has taken place to reduce cognitive dissonance. People who vote for losing candidates express views closer to the winners after the election than they did before.

[Nyhan \(2020: 222\)](#) gives evidence that when people engage in instrumental action, they tend to judge facts more accurately than when they engage in expressive action. When there is no instrumental value in identifying accurate information, as is the case with the expression of political preferences, people are more likely to hold what [Caplan \(2007\)](#) calls irrational beliefs, and make decisions based on emotional rather than logical grounds. There is no penalty for doing so.

These articles indicate that even if instrumental preferences remain the same, expressive preferences can change as a result of voting, and as a result of election outcomes. [Mullainathan and Washington \(2009:](#)

109) argue that “dissonance effects on voting would suggest that election efficiency is not necessarily increasing in turnout as high turnout today implies that a large body of the electorate will be biased in their evaluations of the incumbent in future contests.” One might question whether any election procedure can be judged to be efficient, but one interpretation of Mullainathan and Washington’s conclusion is that cognitive dissonance leads expressive preferences to differ from instrumental preferences.⁸

The endowment effect reinforces voters’ inclinations to minimize cognitive dissonance by maintaining their current preferences. The endowment effect says that individuals place a higher value on things they identify as theirs, as Kahneman et al. (1990) have shown in experiments. The endowment effect should therefore be stronger for political preferences than in market choices because there is no instrumental benefit to individuals from changing their preferences. Individuals place a higher value on political preferences they identify as their own, simply because those preferences are their own.

McMurray (2017: 123) concludes that “a weakly informed voter—is therefore more likely to do harm than good by voting, and so prefers to abstain.” Two problems with this conclusion are that it equates the voter’s level of information with the voter’s intensity of preferences, and it suggests that voters vote because they are other-regarding. A potential third problem is determining whether the information voters have is correct. Chakraborty et al. (2020) develop a model to show that voters make better choices when they are informed by experts, but just about any public policy position is supported by experts, presenting voters with the problem of determining whether experts on one side or the other of a public policy position are correct.

Feddersen and Pesendorfer (1996) link lack of voter information with indifference among alternatives, but this is not necessarily the case. Voters may have strong preferences even with little information, as Caplan indicates, and a lack of information does not appear to dissuade people with strong preferences from expressing them. The lack of consequences for expressing political preferences by uninformed voters leads to voter overconfidence, as documented by Orteleva and Snowberg (2015). The personal cost of making a poor choice in the voting booth is zero. One implication of Tullock (1971) is that part of the utility a voter gets from voting comes from the very fact that the voter knows that one vote will not be decisive.

Voting models tend to assume that voter preferences are given and instrumental, which is why this section has cited many studies concluding that voter preferences are malleable and subject to influence by peer groups, political interest groups, and candidates themselves. Emotional factors like group identity, peer pressure, reduction of cognitive dissonance, the endowment effect, bandwagon effect, and irrationally-held beliefs play a large role in determining voters’ expressive preferences.

An extensive body of research explains why expressive preferences are not derived primarily from instrumental preferences, and often deviate from them because the political preferences people express have no instrumental consequences.. Individuals adapt their preferences to be more like those of their peers, and can shift preferences to conform with those of successful parties and politicians because people get more utility from supporting winners than losers. The idea that expressive preferences differ from instrumental preferences is well-established. The challenge is to understand how expressive preferences are formed.

Anchor Preferences

Public policy preferences can be divided into anchor preferences, which are described in this section, and derivative preferences, which are described in the next. Anchor preferences are those that embody a

⁸ Note, however, that Elender (2012) looks at attitude changes after elections and finds no changes in preferences after elections to minimize cognitive dissonance.

person’s political identity. People may identify as members of a political party, a political movement, an ideology, an issue, an individual candidate, or, as Podhoretz (2009) concludes, a religion. Ackerlof and Kranton (2000) describe the adoption of an anchor as choosing a narrative, which forms their identity. Their political preferences anchor on this identity.

The previous section offered some insight into how anchor preferences are chosen. Typically, people identify with a political group and their anchor preferences are the preferences of that group. People want to fit in with their peers, so adopt similar views. Hamlin and Jennings (2011) refer to this as social identification. There is no instrumental reason to debate with others about expressive preferences, as there is over instrumental preferences. People can disagree with their group about where they should eat lunch, because it makes an instrumental difference in the quality of their lunch, but there is no instrumental reason to debate among friends about who should be elected to a political office; the same person will be elected regardless of whether they agree, so they are inclined to agree, which makes them feel more like part of their group.

Anchor preferences often come from one’s family (Tabellini 2008). A person’s parents supported a particular political party, so they do. Peer pressure from friends and family are influential in all areas. Once those preferences are formed, the endowment effect suggests that people will place a higher value on those preferences just because the preferences are theirs (Kahneman et al. 1990). To reduce cognitive dissonance, people will readily accept information supporting their anchor and will tend to dismiss information that questions their anchor (Mullainathan and Washington 2009). The bandwagon effect (Veblen 1899) further encourages them to adopt and retain the preferences of those around them as their anchor. Bernheim et al. (2021: 722) note that “people are naturally drawn to inflexible outlooks because inflexibility helps them resolve the core time-inconsistency problem.” Having chosen an anchor, people are reluctant to abandon it.

While some people do analyze and evaluate issues to adopt their anchor, there is a path dependency to anchor preferences for the reasons stated in the previous paragraph, and those anchors tend to form for reasons other than the merits of the public policies behind them. This does not mean that people cannot change anchors when compelling reasons arise to do so, but that because anchor preferences are expressive, their origins often lie with factors outside of the particular policies espoused by their anchors. People view their beliefs as assets, Benabou and Tirole ((2011), observe, and are reluctant to depreciate their value by questioning them.

Anchor preferences often are rooted in ideologies. People might think of themselves as progressives, conservatives, libertarians, or socialists. Even more specifically, people may anchor to political parties, thinking of themselves as Democrats or Republicans, for example. Sometimes people will anchor on specific individuals. Donald Trump is a good example of someone who developed a group of supporters that went beyond anchoring to an ideology or party and anchoring specifically on him. His populist message offers an interesting application of the ideas developed here.

The populist message is that government should represent the interests of the masses, and populist candidates advocate shifting political power from the elite to the masses. Yet once elected, those leaders become the elite. One group of elites replaces another. Populism does not follow a specific ideology. In the twenty-first century, Donald Trump and Boris Johnson have been considered populists, but Arendt (1958) also describes Hitler and Stalin as populist leaders. Populists sell the message that they will take power from the elite and return it to the masses, but once in power, they are the new elite. Populism offers a good example of voters adopting the policy preferences offered to them by the elite.

People do not often change their anchors, but when they do, they exchange one anchor for another. While anchors can be chosen for instrumental reasons, they most often are rooted in non-policy-related reasons. Regardless of how they are formed, once people identify with an

anchor, the endowment effect, the bandwagon effect, and attempts to minimize cognitive dissonance work to reinforce that anchor.

Derivative Preferences

Public policy has many different dimensions. Within a broad area such as foreign policy there are many subsidiary issues. How should support for Israel versus Palestinians be balanced? What military and trade policies should be applied to China? How much support should the United States offer to NATO? Within domestic policy, how aggressively should government fight a war on drugs? Under what conditions should abortion be allowed? What is the appropriate role of government in health care? What regulatory environment is appropriate for corporations? There are persuasive arguments to support different views on all these issues and more, the evidence being that many people hold very different views on public policy issues.

Voters tend to be rationally ignorant, issues are often complex, and many issues have no direct effect on most voters. Even if they do, each voter's one vote will not determine public policy, so there is no reason to base political preferences on instrumental grounds. [Wittman \(1989, 1995\)](#) explains that one way voters form policy preferences on many issues is to accept the preferences promoted by their anchors. Supporting candidates and parties means supporting all of the positions of those candidates and parties. Voters do not have the option to vote for the domestic policy proposals of a candidate but against that candidate's foreign policies, for example.

[Holcombe and Gmeiner \(2018\)](#) find that representatives who have the support of one interest group on a particular issue have differing positions on other interest group issues, but supporting a candidate on one issue means supporting that candidate on all issues. Some candidates who support a protectionist trade policy will also support legalizing recreational drugs, while others will be against. Because such support on derivative issues has no instrumental cost, voters tend to adopt the derivative preferences promoted by their anchors. By doing so, voters can feel better about their anchors (endowment effect) and reduce cognitive dissonance.

Even voters who have a high level of general political knowledge tend to lack policy-specific knowledge on most issues, making it easy for them to adopt the derivative preferences of their anchors. [Layman et al. \(2010: 342-343\)](#) provide empirical evidence that party activists tend to shift their political views to correspond with current party thinking. They say "Due to their commitment to their parties, many continuing activists have brought their attitudes on at least some policy dimensions into line with the positions emerging among party candidates, leaders, and other activists."

Unlike the assumptions in formal voting models, voters do not start with a set of preferences and vote for candidates and parties who are closest to what they prefer. They anchor on their preferred candidates and parties, and modify their policy preferences to correspond with those of their anchors. Preferences on most policies are derivative of people's anchor preferences.

One result is that platforms do not necessarily move toward a median preference. [Boleslavsky and Cotton \(2015\)](#) note that more informed voters can lead to greater differentiation of candidate platforms. [Bernheim et al. \(2021: 749\)](#) develop a model where "there is a robust tendency within this framework for people to adopt pure worldviews that credit only one point of view, rather than mixed worldviews that credit many. Polarization follows directly from this tendency." Rather than candidate platforms moving toward the median; voter preferences move toward candidate platforms.

The Issue Space

The political issue space is multidimensional, and [McKelvey \(1976\)](#) shows that when this is the case there is no stable policy platform under majority rule. No matter what the status quo, there is always a different set of policies that would be favored by a majority. [Riker \(1980\)](#) echoes McKelvey's conclusion, discussing the implications of "disequilibrium" in democratic government. Yet [Tullock \(1982\)](#) observes that political outcomes are very stable. McKelvey's model suggests that incumbents should never get reelected, yet they do most of the time, and government policies and programs seem to be more durable than private sector firms, on average.

One explanation is that people do not independently develop their policy preferences on individual issues. Rather, they form anchor preferences, and their preferences on most issues are derived from their anchors. With expressive political preferences, people's preferences are determined by the choices they make rather than their choices being determined by their preferences, as [Buchanan \(1999: 244-245\)](#) notes..

Individuals who anchor as Democrats will tend to support more government gun control, more government involvement in health care, and a woman's right to have an abortion. People do not start with those preferences and then decide "I am a Democrat." Rather, they start with their political identity as Democrats, and decide "I am a Democrat, so I favor gun control, more government involvement in health care, and a woman's right to have an abortion." These preferences are derivative preferences, derived from the policy positions advocated by the individual's anchor.

It would seem unlikely that there would be a strong correlation between people's views on gun control and their views on government's role in health care, or on military spending and legalization of recreational drugs, yet there is. One explanation is that most public policy preferences are derivative. People begin with their anchor preferences and then adopt most of their public policy preferences based on those advocated by their anchors.

Because political preferences are expressive, people can search for information to support their political beliefs and limit cognitive dissonance, and [Benabou and Tirole \(2016: 145\)](#) conclude that "...when it comes to rationalizing away contradictory evidence, compartmentalizing knowledge, and deluding oneself, more educated, attentive, and analytically able people often display greater propensities toward such behaviors." People protect their beliefs, and adopting derivative preferences that support their anchor preferences helps people do this.

In the aggregate, almost all public policy preferences are likely to be derivative. People choose their anchors based on expressive rather than instrumental reasons and derive their policy preferences from their anchors. How many voters will view any one issue as an anchor issue? To offer a simple (and unrealistic) example, assume there are ten voters and ten dimensions in political issue space, and each voter has a different anchor issue. Voter 1 anchors on issue 1, voter 2 anchors on issue 2, and so forth. The result is that on any one issue, political preferences are derivative for nine of the ten voters. Even if anchor preferences are instrumental—and often they are not—there will be almost no correspondence between voters' instrumental preferences and the preferences they express at the ballot box.

A voter who anchors on a party adopts political preferences that correspond with that party's platform. The result is that political preferences will be determined almost entirely by candidates and parties. Their preferences on most issues will be determined not by the utility they would get from policy outcomes, but rather by the positions of those to whom they are anchored.

[Bursztyn, Egorov, and Fiorin \(2020\)](#) note that after Donald Trump was elected president in 2016, individuals were much more willing to express xenophobic views that echoed the president's, and that those who disagreed with those views were less likely to express their disagreement. Expressed political preferences tend to shift to reflect the preferences of political leaders, which is consistent with the endowment effect, the bandwagon effect, and attempts to minimize cognitive dissonance. The avoidance of cognitive dissonance will prevent many voters from changing their party affiliations and political preferences, because to do so would be to admit that they were wrong in the past. The en-

dowment effect suggests that people place a higher value on the party they identify with simply because they view it as their party.

Candidate Determination of Policy Preferences

Voting models such as [Downs \(1957\)](#) depict voters as having preferences, and political candidates adjusting their platforms to conform to voter preferences.⁹ An analysis of the way that political preferences are formed suggests that causation runs (mostly) in the opposite direction. Candidates have platforms and voters adjust their preferences to conform with candidates and parties with whom they anchor, rather than the other way around. Most policy preferences are derivative of people's anchor preferences. The utility they get from their political preferences comes solely from the benefits they gain from holding and expressing those preferences. Political outcomes will be the same regardless of the preferences they express at the ballot box, so they experience no negative consequences from casting a vote that is against their instrumental interests..

Ultimately, the political elite determine voter preferences. Voters tend to be rationally ignorant ([Downs 1957](#)) and rationally irrational ([Caplan 2007](#)), and adopt their public policy preferences from people who have a comparative advantage in formulating them: the political elite. Elites have the ability not only to exercise the power of government but to direct the political views of those over whom they rule, because citizens anchor their political preferences to elite views and most of their policy preferences are derived from their anchors.

[Buchanan \(2003:](#) 16) said "public choice may be summarized by the three-word description, 'politics without romance.'" The conclusions of this paper are unromantic indeed. The political elite determine the policy preferences of the masses, who adopt the ideas promoted by the elite because there is no instrumental cost to doing so. The endowment effect, the bandwagon effect, and attempts to reduce cognitive dissonance are well-established concepts in the social sciences that support this conclusion. Democratic institutions aggregate the expressive preferences of citizens, not their instrumental preferences, and the expressive preferences of voters reflect the preferences of the elite, not the instrumental values of the masses.

Conclusion

Economic models of democratic decision-making assume that voters have preferences, and that candidates and parties adjust their platforms to conform to voter preferences. The direction of causation (mostly) runs in the other direction. Candidates and parties develop platforms and citizens adopt the policy preferences offered to them by the political elite. Elite influence over the policy preferences of the masses is facilitated because the political preferences of the masses are expressive preferences that have no instrumental effect. Election outcomes will be the same regardless of how any individual voter votes, so voters may vote for outcomes they would not choose if the choice were theirs alone.

The idea that voters vote expressively rather than instrumentally has been well-established for decades, but the literature on expressive voting has drawn few conclusions about how voters form their expressive preferences. This paper builds on an extensive literature to argue that citizens anchor their political preferences to a party, a candidate, or an ideology, and that anchor forms the individual's political identity. Most

⁹ See [Enelow and Hinich \(1984\)](#) and [Tideman \(2006\)](#) for more detailed discussion of this type of model. Analyses of social choice such as [Arrow \(1953\)](#) go a step further to try to analyze how individual preferences can be aggregated to make desirable social choices. The logic underlying models of social choice suffers substantially when one realizes that people's preferences are expressive rather than instrumental. But, see [Clarke \(1971\)](#) and [Tideman and Tullock \(1976\)](#) for one possibility. The advantage of that electoral system is that it does contain a (small) incentive for voters to vote instrumentally rather than expressively.

policy preferences held by individuals then derive from those of their anchors. Citizens adopt the policy preferences of the political elite.

This paper calls into question the applicability of economic models of democratic decision-making, but more generally raises questions about the ability of democratic institutions to control the power of the political elite. Those who hold government power have only limited accountability to the electorate if the policy preferences held by the electorate are largely derived from the elite.

Funding Declaration

This work received no outside funding.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The author has no conflicting interests.

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